

# Women Economic Empowerment: A Case Study of Women in Economy Project (WIE) which is a part of Promote Partnership in Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** Women economic empowerment is one of the important issues in the world nowadays and it also consider as a focused priority in Afghanistan since 2001. Governments of Afghanistan, donors and international NGOs have implemented several projects in order to bring changes on women situation in the country. The government of Afghanistan with financial support of United States for International Development (USAID) have developed a program for women named Promote Partnership which was covered four projects (Women Leadership Development, Women in the Government, Musharikat and Women in Economy). WIE budget was 71.5 million USD which was completed in 5 years. This research paper focuses on WIE project which focuses women entrepreneurship and micro business development only in Kabul province. I have come with 20 interviews from women entrepreneurs which WIE project have covered them to support their businesses and entrepreneurs. The main questions in this research are “How intervention for economic empowerment affected the women situation?” and “How the promote partnership influenced women economic empowerment in Afghanistan?” Therefore I selected qualitative method to describe the situation in a better way.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Economic empowerment of women, Micro Business

## 1. Introduction

Afghanistan is patriarchy country. Almost all the economic facilities are surrounded by men. Even today, men own a high proportion of businesses. This imbalance is even larger in developing and least developed countries due to socio-cultural and traditional conservative values, which further prohibits women’s participation in economic growth. Among these conflict and barrier women economic empowerment is very important issue in Afghanistan. There is no “official” definition of economic empowerment, we can generally say that it consists of giving a group of people the means to be in control of their own economic destiny. It consists of helping people improve their economic status while, at the same time, gaining more control over that status. But, according to the social sciences website<sup>1</sup> “Economic empowerment” can be defined as the “development of the ability of the historically disadvantaged to engage in economic activity that benefits both the individuals in question and the broader society”

According to the World Bank report<sup>2</sup>, about 50% of world populations are women. It means half of percentage of the word are female, therefore, men and women have the equal percentage. But the world economy is mainly under the control of women. Based on an estimation in 2018, about 48.6% of population in Afghanistan are women<sup>3</sup>. According to Mr. Moeen, Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) focal point, about 10% of them are involved with micro-business or self-employment activates.

In 2001, the Government of Afghanistan established Ministry of Women Affairs in order to bring positive

changes in women situations. Since 2001, a large amount of money is spends each year. Furthermore, a lot of local and international NGOs are working for women in different sectors. Some of these NGOs are working to empower women in Kabul and other provinces.

One of the programs which covers a big amount of budget is Promote Partnership that consist of three projects; Women in Economy (WIE), Women Leadership Development (WLD), Musharekat and Women in Government (WIG).

**Women in Economy (WIE)** was implemented in five economic zones and initiating across the 30 provinces of Afghanistan. The main objectives are: (a) to empower Afghan women from across the country gain the skills, voices, and resources to contribute to economic growth, (b) to reduce poverty levels, (c) to help the Afghan women-owned businesses, (d) to increase their revenues and income growth, make investments in their own and sustainability, and (e) to incentivize companies for improved workplace environments for women, (f) to assist Afghan women on businesses with financial and strategic planning, and (g) to access market information and financing, and commercial relationships. The project supports women aging group 18 and above to find new or better jobs through career counseling, workplace skills development, and job skills training based on market demand. The total budget of this project is \$71.5 Million. (Promote: Women in the economy, 2019).

Women have received support for a range of activities including setting up micro-businesses, trainings, scholarships to study abroad, equipment’s to support their companies, creating job opportunities for women, health care programs and leadership programs for women. Therefore, I would like to explore its influence on women’s circumstances through the WIE project. Since I was working with the Afghan women inside Afghanistan and I’m so interested to conduct the research aiming to understand the influence of such as projects, especially about women

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/whats-definition-economic-empowerment-454154>

<sup>2</sup> Population, female (% of total population), 2019 retrieve <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.pop.totl.fe.zs>

<sup>3</sup> World bank, (2018)available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.pop.totl.fe.zs>

economic empowerment based in Afghanistan, therefore, I selected WIE project as case study for my research.

### Women empowerment and economic growth

Women economic empowerment is the process of achieving women's equal access to and control over economic resources and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives (Taylor and Pereznieto, 2014). Empowering girls and women is the key to economic growth, political stability, and social transformation. World leaders, experts and scholars alike are giving their voice to this critical endeavor. "When women succeed, nations are more safe, secure and prosperous (Barack Obama, 44th US President).

Women empowerment is one of the primary efforts in the world. In the meanwhile, Women's economic advancement has led to increases investments in children's education and health, and reduces household poverty (World Bank, 2012; 2013).

Education is one of the key aspects to empower women and help them to reach on gender equality. Naila Kabeer (2012), in her article points out two criteria for women growths; gender equality and its effects on economic empowerment and women education reduces poverty in families and societies.

The governments of Afghanistan in cooperation with international community and NGOs have implemented a lot of programs and projects in order to empower women economic situation and the Promote Partnership: Women in Economy project is one of them. WIE is a USAID funded project which started in July 2015 and ended in June 2020. The project covered many small business enterprises and provided employment opportunities.

## 2. Interviews

### Peshraft Zanan Manufacturing Factory

Ms. Marghoba Safi, the president of Peshraft Zanan (Women Development) Manufacturing Factory in Kabul. She has a bachelor's degree in Economy from Kabul University. She was working with many local and international organizations in Kabul. With years of experience, she established Peshraft Zanan Manufacturing Factory. The factory is a soap making company and all the products are made of organic and natural goods. Ms. Safi believes that her business can be a path empower specific women and helps them to strengthen their social and economic potential in the society.

The company tries to find its place to local market and expand it at least to regional bazaars in neighboring countries. Therefore, it produces organic skincare products like soap, body lotion, anti-wrinkle cream, lips gloss, mint-extracts and other items.

The factory creates a peaceful environment where the staffs can work and prove their talents. It is a safe and professional environment for Afghan women to work, learn different skills, build their capacity and creates a better future. She says that the company provides job opportunities to more

than 100 women. Besides their salary, there are trainings and capacity building opportunities.

Peshraft Zanan was covered by WIE project. Ms. Safi's factory was selected as one of the beneficiaries of WIE when she attended in a business management plan which was held by USAID in Kabul. WIE hired a business development specialist and some interns to strengthen their human resource management. Besides that, the project assisted the company in packaging, labeling and finding appropriate market to their products.



Figure 1: During Interview with Ms. Safi in a National exhibition

### Handicraft Factory

Farzana Faizi a psychologist and an Afghan entrepreneur who was a refugee in Iran and return back to country in 2010. She is was hired as a handicraft instructor in one of Kabul University projects and teaching more than 70 students for one and half years. But the salary was not enough to cover all her expenses, therefore, she started to look for an alternative and she decided to develop her business idea which she had in her mind. As she was a handicraft instructor, she decided to start a self-finance business in this area. She established her company in 2017. To startup her business, she talked with her students and 35 volunteer students became ready to assist her in her new business. Ms. Faizi faced to financial problem that is why she received a loan from Micro Finance Bank. At the beginning, she started her work from her home and all her students was assigned what to do and how to complete the tasks. By the time her business got better, she hired all those volunteers as permanent employees.

The factory is producing scarf, shoes, bag, handkerchief and traditional dress, but they did not have a suitable market. Although she hired four marketing officers and a marketing coordinator, but still there was something missing.

In 2018, she got an opportunity to receive technical and financial support. The project hired a business development specialist and some interns to help them in their professional works. WIE has also provided equipment such as loom machines, wool, blurs and has paid a year of factory rental money and staffs salary.

Day by day, the factory's products were increasing both in quality and quantity. WIE supports resulted that the factory finds appropriate market even outside the country.

She claims that she could find customers in Pakistan, Turkey and Iran and she exports her products to these countries.

Recently she signed a memorandum letter with the embassy of India in Kabul in order to export and find market in India in 2020.

In local market, her products are mainly women and tourists who are visiting Kabul. The company's revenue increased from 4% to 8% and by the end of 2019, the total employees increased to 70.



**Figure 2:** During my visit from an exhibition which was held by the company for the 8<sup>th</sup> of March

Afghan women entrepreneurs comes from a conservative society where a tough patriarchy situation is in power. But still there are a large number of women who want to stand on their own feet and are trying to be independent. Most of women entrepreneurs have children and they also have to take care of housework. Most of these entrepreneurs are highly educated and have enough academic background to run their businesses. In the meanwhile, there are some others who are illiterate, but they are still trying to run a business.

The case studies and interviews which I had with these companies presidents show that besides a lot of challenges, they are trying to prove that women also can play important roles in developing a country like Afghanistan. Although they do not have enough financial resources, but they are able to look to find financial supports like getting loan from banks, asking NGOs and women focused projects to support their businesses. But the WIE project has a specific focus on bringing social and economic facilities in women life.

The Handcraft Company which firstly established by getting loan from bank, but after some efforts they could find other resources to develop their businesses.

On the other hand, Peshraft Zanan like any other micro-business, started from very small steps towards improvement. Their products did not have good markets and they was about to stop their business. But since they received financial and technical supports from WIE, they started getting better and better. They could announce their products as a brand and could find good markets, even in some of regional countries.

These companies created job opportunities for more than hundred women and engaged them to the economic activities which helped them capable self-stand and have not financially depended to their family members.

But there are still challenges towards these businesses like conservative society, security problems and some family challenges. But here I list them in three main challenges:

- a) Luck of financial supports in many women micro-businesses;
- b) Although there are some projects and program who are supporting women businesses, but they are not sustainable and they are based on time and budget;
- c) Most of products do not have a good market to supply their goods and luck of markets make a lot of problems.

#### Some Policy recommendations for my findings:

- 1) There are very complicated bureaucracy in passing documents for receiving loans for micro-businesses. Therefore, it takes days and even months for a woman to get loan from a bank. The government of Afghanistan should bring some facilities in policies for receiving loan from the banks.
- 2) The projects and programs who are design to support women entrepreneurship should be for a long term. The government of Afghanistan, especially the Ministry of Women Affairs and the ministry of Economy should list some projects each year to their annual budget in order to strengthen the women micro-businesses.
- 3) These companies are legally registered in the ministry of Women Affairs, ministry of Industries and Commerce and the ministry of economy. These ministries, especially the Ministry of women Affairs have to design some capacity building programs, trainings, workshops to increase their potential in developing their businesses. Furthermore, the ministry of Industry and commerce should support them in standard libeling, packaging and parceling of their products and should look markets in outside of the country.

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